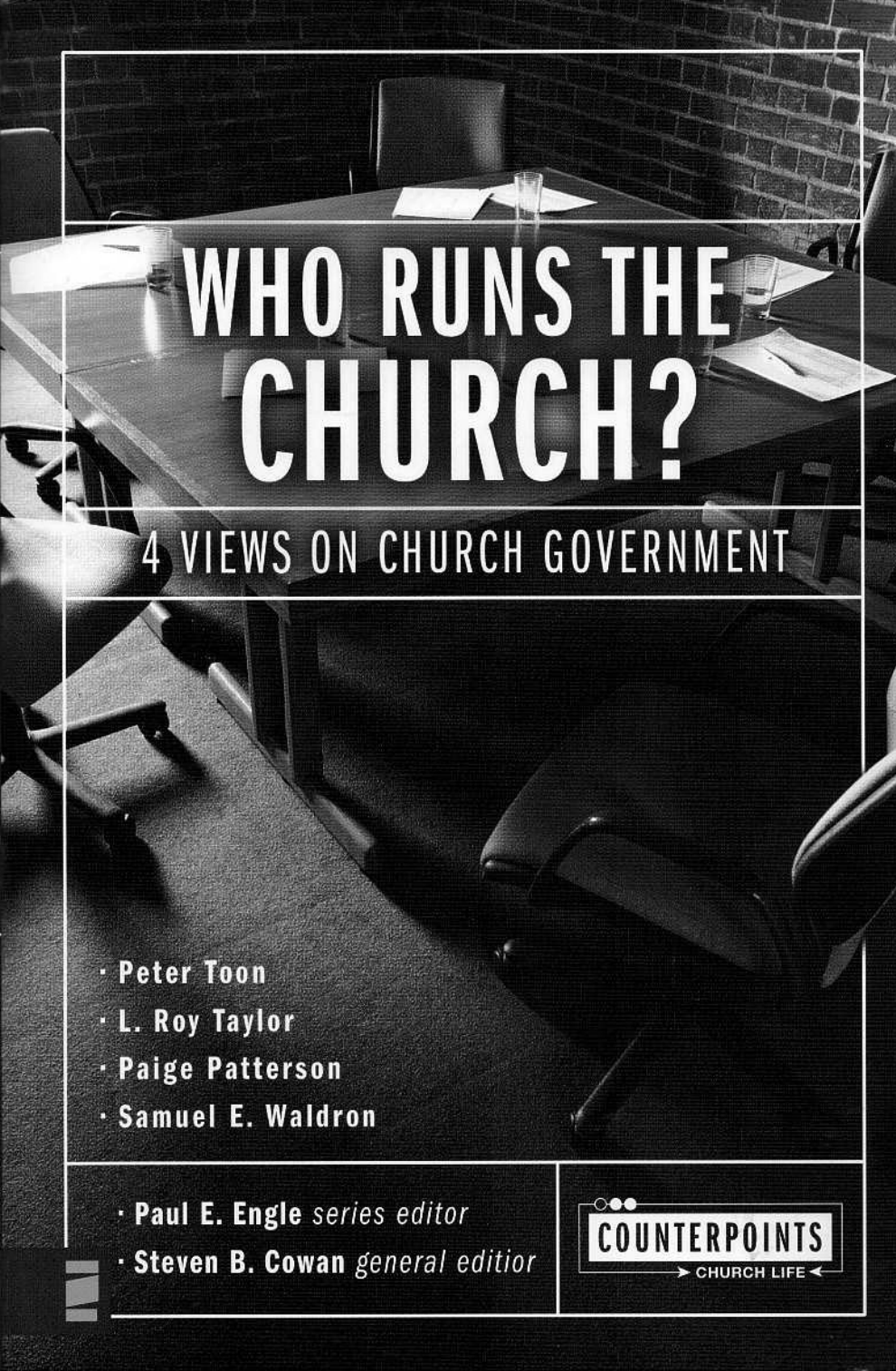
WHO RUNS THE CHURCH?
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PLURAL-ELDER CONGREGATIONALISM

Samuel E. Waldron

ITS DEFINITION

In this discussion of church government, I have been asked to defend *plural-elder congregationalism*. This mouthful of syllables has a clearly defined meaning within the context both of this discussion and the history of Christian debate on the subject of church government. That meaning may not, however, be immediately evident to the reader. Allow me to explain the meaning of plural-elder congregationalism through three assertions.

Congregational Church Government

Plural-elder congregationalism is, in the first place, congregational church government. Congregationalism, as it has been used historically in the Christian debates over church government, has two related, but distinct, meanings. Though a congregational form of church government has often combined both of these ideas, it is important especially for my purposes in this discussion to distinguish them. Congregationalism may refer to the independence of the local church or *independency*. It also may refer to a democratic form of government in the local church or *democracy*. It also may refer to and combine both these ideas.[1]

Congregationalism as *democracy* will be discussed below in relation to a plurality of elders leading local churches. When I

refer in this first assertion to congregationalism, it is to congregationalism as designating the independence of the local church.

As *independency*, congregationalism has to do with the relation of local churches to one another. In this sense congregationalism teaches the independence (sometimes called the autonomy) of each local church. In other words, it indicates that there is no ecclesiastical government or hierarchy (in the visible church on earth) with authority over local churches. Local churches are in this limited sense independent of one another. Though independent churches have often manifested a strong *associational* impulse and have worked together in associations of local churches, even the most strongly associational congregationalist, if he or she is consistent, must carefully guard the independence of the local church.[2]

Plural-Elder Church Government

In the second place, plural-elder congregationalism is plural-elder church government. Plural-elder church government means that each local church should be led, under normal circumstances, by a plurality of elders.[3] It is clear that here I agree with my Presbyterian brother and disagree with my Baptist brother. Presbyterian churches on a local level are led by a plurality of elders. Single-elder congregationalist churches, of course, are not.

But this is not the whole story. For here we confront the problem of congregationalism (in the sense of democratic rule) versus rule by elders in the local church. Many evangelicals today have discovered in their New Testament that local churches should have (and, thus, be led by) elders. This renewed interest in elders has created a reaction against the radical, democratic form of government practiced in many evangelical churches. It is common for those who have discovered the biblical teaching about elders to say that they believe in rule by elders and not congregationalism (in the sense of democracy).

I suspect that most who say this only believe in rule by elders in comparison (or as relative) to the congregational democracy with which they have been acquainted. The rule of elders in the Reformed tradition makes the decisions of the eldership authoritative regardless of the consent of the church as a whole.[4]

James Bannerman, a respected Presbyterian author, makes clear what rule by elder has meant historically for presbyterians:

> The system of Presbyterianism requires that every proper means be employed, in the way of explanation, persuasion, and instruction, to secure the concurrence of the members in the acts and proceedings of the rulers of Christian society. But Presbyterians do not, like Independents, hold that this consent is a condition upon which the lawfulness of the acts of the office-bearers is suspended, or as much a necessary element in any judgment of the ecclesiastical body as the consent of the rulers themselves. On the contrary, the consent of the members is, upon the Presbyterian theory, a consent added to the authoritative decision of the office-bearers, not entering into it as an element necessary to its validity, without which it would be neither lawful nor binding.[5]

When I defend the leadership of a plurality of elders in the local church, I do not intend to defend the presbyterian view on this matter.

Of course, this does not mean that I am happy with the typical, democratic congregationalism of most independent churches today. Furthermore, it seems to me that a biblical appreciation of a plurality of elders in the local churches must logically and practically tend to modify and restrain the radical democratic tendencies of many evangelical churches today. Even if we reject the presbyterian version of elder rule, there is a kind of tension between a democratic view of church government and a plural-elder view of church government.[6]

Reformed or Puritan Church Government

My third defining assertion with regard to plural-elder congregationalism is that it is a Reformed or Puritan church government. Historically speaking, the main advocates of plural-elder congregationalism are firmly associated with the Reformed and Puritan traditions. These views owe much of their prominence today to the congregational and Particular Baptist elements in the Puritan movement.

The Puritan movement and Reformed tradition of which it was a part believed that the Bible provides a divinely mandated

church government. Indeed, the very origin of the congregational and Particular Baptist wing of Puritanism cannot be understood apart from this. The authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures with regard to church government is emphasized in the famous *Apologeticall Narration* written by the congregational members of the Westminster Assembly in 1643:

> First, the supreame rule *without us*, was the Primitive patterne and example of the churches erected by the Apostles. Our consciences were possessed with that reverence and adoration of the fulnesse of the Scriptures, that there is therein a compleat sufficiencie, as to make the *man of God perfect*, so also to make the Churches of God perfect, (meere circumstances we except, or what rules the law of nature doth in common dictate) if the directions and examples therein delivered were fully known and followed.[7]

The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order concludes with a detailed account in no less than thirty paragraphs of "The Institution of the Churches, and the Order Appointed in Them by Jesus Christ." John Owen in his preface to that document also asserts the complete sufficiency of the Scriptures for the government of the church:

> What we have laid down about the churches and their government, we humbly conceive to be the order which Christ has himself appointed to be observed. We have endeavoured to follow Scripture light; and those that went before us according to that rule.[8]

Such sentiments simply assert that the same *regulative principle* that guided the worship of the Puritan church also guided its order or government. That regulative principle is stated in almost identical language in each of the three great confessions of the Puritan movement: the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterians, the Savoy Declaration of the Congregationalists, and the 1689 (or Second London) Confession of the Baptists. Here is how they put their understanding of that principle:

> The acceptable way of worshipping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will,

> that he may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.[9]

James Renihan in his study of the pivotal period of Particular Baptist history from 1675–1705 shows that the Particular Baptists believed that their church polity was mandated by the Scriptures. He calls this their "primitivistic impulse."[10]

My defense of plural-elder congregationalism shares this Puritan and primitivist impulse. This means that I share my Presbyterian brother's commitment to the regulative principle of the church. It means that I disagree with the traditional, Anglican rejection of the regulative principle of the church and the allowance they make for the role of human reason and authority in the construction of church government.[11] James Bannerman helpfully contrasts the Puritan doctrine and the Anglican doctrine on this matter:

> In the case of the Church of England, its doctrine in regard to Church power in the worship of God is, that it has a right to decree everything, except what is forbidden in the Word of God. In the case of our own Church, its doctrine in reference to Church power in the worship of God is, that it has a right to decree nothing, except what expressly or by implication is enjoined by the Word of God.[12]

This means that I have a profoundly different hermeneutic and approach to church government than that of the brother defending Anglicanism in this discussion.

It also means that I have a profoundly different approach to this subject than much of contemporary evangelicalism. Like the Ephesian disciples of John the Baptist who told Paul, "We have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit" (Acts 19:2), many evangelicals tell us by their conduct that they have not even heard whether there is a biblical church government. Without shame, many act as if they were allowed to order "the household of God, which is the church of the living God" (1 Tim. 3:15) according to their human traditions, personal tastes, and natural reason. My defense of plural-elder congregationalism is, among other things, a protest against such attitudes in evangelical churches.

ITS DISTINCTIONS

There are many variations within plural-elder congregationalism and significant differences with regard to many issues. Should elders be ordained?[13] Assuming that all (or even some of) the elders are pastors, should the elders be addressed as Pastor So-and-so (supply either a first or last name)?[14] Should elders (at least some of them) be regularly supported by the church?[15] These questions have different degrees of importance, but they are not the most critical questions for my present purpose. The two most important issues of distinction among plural-elder congregationalists have to do with the organization of the eldership and the authority of the eldership.

With regard to the organization of the eldership, the different views can be arranged on a spectrum. On the one side are those who hold a strict two-office view (elders and deacons). Here the parity or equality of the elders is carefully guarded. In this view not only do all the elders have exactly the same office, but little or no distinction between the different elders is allowed. It resists any elder being perceived as the main elder. This resistance may involve the refusal to provide any of the elders with regular, financial support. Alternatively, this resistance might involve the elders sharing equally any financial support provided by the church. Specialization in the eldership is resisted. Public preaching and teaching, other public ministries, the chairmanship of the elders, and other pastoral tasks are distributed equally or rotated among the elders in order to make certain that the parity or equality of the elders is not impaired.

At the other end of this spectrum are those who hold what approaches a three-office view of the church. In this system a distinction is made within the eldership between the teaching elder (variously called the minister, the pastor, or the senior pastor) and the rest of the elders (the ruling elders). Such an organization is very common among Presbyterians. Though the teaching elder is considered one of the elders, he also has a role in this organization that approaches a distinct office. He is the chairman of the elders. He ministers the Word as the teaching elder, while the other (ruling) elders only rarely preach or teach publicly. He is the pastor and addressed as such, but the rest of the elders are not. He is professionally trained and called from

outside the church, but the rest of the eldership is composed of "lay" elders. All this being the case, the pastor carries the responsibility of giving overall leadership to the church and the elders.

I have attempted to avoid "loaded" language and to be fair in my presentation of the two ends of the spectrum. The reader, however, will probably not be surprised to learn that in my view a biblical organization of the eldership in plural-elder congregationalism lies somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. I believe that there are churches that are more or less accurately described by each of the models I have outlined above. I do not, however, have any particular churches in mind. Furthermore, I believe that most of plural-elder congregationalism practices an organization somewhere in the middle of this spectrum.

The other major issue has to do with the authority of the eldership. On this issue too there is a great deal of diversity of opinion and practice. There are those who have welded a "presbyterian view" of the rule of elders onto congregationalism (in the sense of independency). In this system the eldership appoints the officers of the church and exercises church discipline. The consent of the church is merely a desirable addition to the authoritative act of the elders in such matters. At the other end of the spectrum are those who hold that church discipline is enacted and officers are elected by the assembled church and reduce the elders to mere representatives of the assembly, administrators of the will of the church, and facilitators of group discussion.

As with the organization of the eldership, so also with the issue of its authority, I have attempted to be fair in the way I have described the two ends of the spectrum. I believe that there are churches that are more or less accurately described by each of the models I have outlined above. I do not, however, have any particular churches in mind. Furthermore, I believe most of plural-elder congregationalism practices an organization that moderates both of these extremes.

ITS DEVELOPMENT

Before I can come to the biblical defense and demonstration of the church government I have defined above, it is important to review its precedents in church history. Two periods are of particular importance to help us understand the characteristics

and precedents of plural-elder congregationalism. The first is the period of the earliest post-apostolic church in the late first century and the first half of the second century. The writers of this period are known as the apostolic fathers. The second is the period of the Puritan movement in the British Isles and the American colonies from the late sixteenth through the seventeenth and even into the eighteenth century. The important writers here are the Puritan congregationalists including the Particular Baptists.

The Apostolic Fathers

The Apostolic Fathers are those writings supposed to have been written before AD 150 by the disciples of the apostles.[16] Perhaps the most important debate regarding the Apostolic Fathers has been over the issue of church government. The Anglican J. B. Lightfoot argued from the Apostolic Fathers that, though absent from the New Testament, episcopacy nevertheless had apostolic sanction. His argument is as follows. Evidence from the Apostolic Fathers attests single-bishop rule throughout the Roman province of Asia by early in the second century. John the apostle was active in Asia until the last decade of the first century. The institution of single-bishop rule must, therefore, have had the sanction of the apostle John and, thus, in this sense be apostolic.[17]

What is the evidence from the Apostolic Fathers that plays such a crucial part in this argument? It is the evidence found in Ignatius's *Seven Epistles* and, we must add, that evidence *alone*. Written possibly in 107, but no later than 116, these letters of Ignatius attest single-bishop rule in Antioch of Syria and (more to the point) in the cities of Ephesus, Tralles, Smyrna, Magnesia, and Philadelphia. To three of these cities John the apostle addressed letters in the book of Revelation. The following statement of Ignatius is representative of the view of church government found throughout his epistles:

> Now about my fellow slave Burrhus, your godly deacon, who has been richly blessed. I very much want him to stay with me. He will thus bring honor on you and the bishop. Crocus too, who is a credit both to God and to you, and who I received as a model of your love, altogether raised my spirits (May the Father of Jesus Christ grant him a similar comfort!), as did Onesimus, Burrhus, Euplus, and Fronto. In them I saw and loved you all. May I always be glad about you, that is, if I deserve to be! It is right, then, for you to render all glory to Jesus Christ, seeing he has glorified you. Thus, united in your submission, and subject to the bishop and the presbytery, you will be real saints. . . . Yes, I had the good fortune to see you, in the persons of Damas your bishop (he's a credit to God!), and of your worthy presbyters, Bassus and Apollonius, and of my fellow slave, the deacon Zotion. I am delighted with him, because he submits to the bishop as to God's grace, and to the presbytery as to the law of Jesus Christ.[18]

Ignatius here assumes that in the local church at Ephesus there was a single bishop, several presbyters (or elders), and several deacons.

Lightfoot's argument, though problematic in other ways, gains plausibility from the Ignatian evidence. It has been subjected, however, to intense scrutiny and especially by Presbyterians anxious to show that the early churches were ruled by a plurality of elders. This scrutiny is well deserved. The astonishing fact is that there is no evidence at all for single-bishop rule of the local church in the rest of the Apostolic Fathers. It is completely absent from the other eight Apostolic Fathers mentioned above. Yet more, it is not only absent, but it is actually contradicted throughout the rest of the Apostolic Fathers by statements that indicate that churches were led by a plurality of bishops or presbyters. The two points to be observed in this evidence are that each local church is said to have a plurality of bishops and that the office of bishop and presbyter are equated.

Representative of the rest of the Apostolic Fathers are the statements made by Clement in his letter to the Corinthian church. The backdrop of this letter is a revolt in the Corinthian church that had removed their presbyters from office. Clement is writing on behalf of the church in Rome to exhort the Corinthian church to restore their former presbyters to office. As you will see, in all of this there is no mention either in Corinth or Rome of a single, supreme bishop:

> Well, then, who of your number is noble, large-hearted, and full of love? Let him say: "If it is my fault that revolt, strife, and schism have arisen, I will leave, I will go away

> wherever you wish, and do what the congregation orders. Only let Christ's flock live in peace with their appointed presbyters. . . . They preached in country and city, and appointed their first converts, after testing them by the Spirit, to be the bishops and deacons of future believers. Nor was this any novelty, for Scripture had mentioned bishops and deacons long before. For this is what Scripture says somewhere: "I will appoint their bishops in righteousness and their deacons in faith." . . . Happy, indeed, are those presbyters who have already passed on, and who need not fear that anyone will remove them from their secure positions. But you, we observe, have removed a number of people, despite their good conduct, from a ministry they have fulfilled with honor and integrity. . . . And that is why you who are responsible for the revolt must submit to the presbyters. You must humble your hearts and be disciplined so that you repent.[19]

Also interesting because of the light it sheds on the church government at Rome from whence Clement was writing is the following quotation from the *Shepherd of Hermas*:

> After that I saw a vision in my house, and that old woman came and asked me, if I had yet given the book to the presbyters. And I said that I had not. And then she said, "You have done well, for I have some words to add. But when I finish all the words, all the elect will then become acquainted with them through you. You will write therefore two books, and you will send the one to Clemens and the other to Grapte. And Clemens will send his to foreign countries, for permission has been granted to him to do so. And Grapte will admonish the widows and the orphans. But you will read the words in this city, along with the presbyters who preside over the Church."[20]

The evidence makes as clear as could be wished that the churches of Rome and Corinth did not have single bishops. Interestingly, in his letter to the Romans Ignatius did not attribute the single-bishop system to the church there.

What shall we make of all this? How shall we explain the apparent contrast between Ignatius and the rest of the apostolic fathers? It is clear from the church fathers that single-bishop rule was at a later date to hold universal sway in the ante-Nicene

church. It is also admitted by Anglicans such as Lightfoot that the distinctive characteristics of episcopal church government are missing from the New Testament.[21] It is indisputable, then, that a dynamic existed in the early church that quickly developed episcopacy. Though Lightfoot attributes this development to apostolic sanction, this is not the only possible explanation. Ignatius undoubtedly was the single bishop of the large and ancient church in Antioch in Syria. It is not so clear that Ignatius was correct in attributing this system to the churches in Asia. It may be that he naively projected his fully developed single-bishop system onto churches where this system was not fully developed. Consider the proposed explanation of single-bishop rule provided by F. F. Bruce:

> One obvious consideration is that the emergence of a single leader was almost inevitable in the circumstances. Committee rule in general is weak unless there is a strong chairman. Quite often the strongest personality will become chairman in any case, and spiritual strength need not be excluded from his qualities. In practice such a man will become primus inter pares, and once his position is accepted and perpetuated, before long he will be regarded, in theory as well as in practice, as primus pure and simple. An outstanding early example of such a man who plainly acted as primus inter pares was James of Jerusalem.[22]

It may well be that the churches in Asia had *primus inter pares* (first among equals) systems and that Ignatius assumed that they were *primus* systems and that the leading elders were like himself the single bishops of the church. Such a mistake would be easy for the passionate Ignatius to make. It is also possible that Ignatius's single-minded and repeated insistence on the importance of the authority of the bishop may witness to the fact that his ideal was far from an ecclesiastical reality. F. F. Bruce asserts: "To Ignatius the monarchical episcopate is literally an idee fixe. The vehemence of Ignatius's protestations, in fact, is the plainest evidence that his view of the indispensable and supremely authoritative character of the office was far from being universally shared."[23]

What church government is, then, favored by the evidence from the Apostolic Fathers? Though the evidence may not allow dogmatism, it certainly suggests and is very consistent with plural-elder congregationalism.

In the first place, and in spite of Ignatius, the evidence suggests that the apostolic churches were led by a plurality of presbyters (elders) who were also called bishops (overseers) elected by the common suffrage of the church. The church in Corinth somehow removed (wrongly in Clement's opinion) their elders from office. He exhorts the evildoers to repent and submit to the judgment of the congregation.[24] The *Didache* confirms this congregational element in early church government by exhorting its readers to "elect for yourselves bishops and deacons who are a credit to the Lord, men who are gentle, generous, faithful, and well tried."[25] The first and fatal step away from this original system of church government and toward the monarchical episcopate of Catholicism happened when, contrary to the teaching of the New Testament, the title "bishop" was reserved for the leading presbyter in each church.

In the second place, the earliest evidence is certainly consistent with the idea of independency. Without doubt there was a strong sense of solidarity among the churches.[26] Clement manifests this sense of concern and responsibility for the church in Corinth in his letter to them. Yet Clement's concern is clearly limited to instructing, advising, and exhorting an independent church. There is no early evidence of the exercise of either a presbyterian or episcopal authority over local churches. Indeed, Lightfoot admits the independency of the earliest churches:

> Christendom had hitherto existed as a number of distinct isolated congregations, drawn in the same direction by a common faith and common sympathies, accidentally linked one with another by the personal influence and apostolic authority of their common teachers, but not bound together in a harmonious whole by any permanent external organization. Now at length this great result was brought about. The magnitude of the change effected during this period may be measured by the difference in the constitutions and conception of the Christian Church as presented in the Pastoral Epistles of St Paul and the letters of St Ignatius respectively.[27]

This is a startling admission, but even it does not go far enough. For even when we read the epistles of Ignatius, there is no evidence that a bishop possessed any authority outside his own (local) church. Similarly, there is no evidence in the Apostolic Fathers that elders possessed any but local church authority.

It is certainly true that the Apostolic Fathers manifest a church in transition to episcopacy. All the evidence, however, is consistent with the idea that the starting point of that transition and development was plural-elder congregationalism.

The Puritan Congregationalists (Including the Particular Baptists)

Providence brought to pass a unique set of circumstances during the "Puritan Century"[28] in England. These unique circumstances resulted in the return to the visible church of the plural-elder congregationalism that was the polity of the earliest churches. What happened was this.

In most of Europe the Reformation of the sixteenth century was either persecuted into nonexistence by Roman Catholicism or resulted in the erection of Protestant or Reformed state churches. The Reformed version of these state churches was usually presbyterian in polity. The unique thing about England was that neither of these things happened. The original presbyterian convictions of the Reformed movement were never able quite to take over the Church of England. Neither, however, were they persecuted out of existence. As a result, some Puritans began to believe that neither the Episcopalians nor the Presbyterians had taken the purification of the church far enough. A whole branch of the Reformed and Puritan movement in England (and its American colonies) became congregational in their view of the local church. These congregationalists seem to have been of one mind that each local church should be independent.

About many other matters they came to disagree. Very early (in the first half of the seventeenth century) some in the Puritan congregational churches developed Baptist convictions and formed separate Particular (or Reformed) Baptist churches.[29] Differences also emerged over the relation of independent churches to the Church of England,[30] and over the issue of religious liberty.[31] Finally, and most importantly for our present purposes, there were congregationalists (known as Browne-ists after Robert Browne) who practiced a very thorough or radical form

of democracy in their churches, while there were others who advocated a much stronger view of the rule of elders in the local church.[32] The many differences among the congregationalists requires that we be cautious with regard to sweeping pronouncements about their church polity that go beyond their shared independency.[33]

Congregationalism (in the sense of the independence of the local church) is, then, not really at issue with regard to Puritan congregationalism. What does need discussion is the issue of how these fathers of congregationalism believed the local church should govern itself. Two issues are involved.

First, did they believe that the local church should be led by a plurality of elders? Standing as they did in the Reformed tradition, the idea that the church should be led by a plurality of elders was their common inheritance. Shawn Wright declares:

> Every ecclesiastical entity which influenced the particular Baptists had a plurality of elders in each congregation. Plural elders was, for instance, the practice of John Calvin and the Reformed churches. More importantly, it was the practice of the Independent Congregationalists who were the forefathers of the Particular Baptists. The Presbyterians of Scotland, the divines at the Westminster Assembly, and even their theological nemeses, the General Baptists, had a plurality of elders.[34]

In the paragraph following, Wright avers that even early Particular Baptists practiced a plurality of elders.[35] Wright is correct in this summary of the situation.

The Puritan congregationalists certainly believed that each church should have, if possible, a plurality of elders. The dissenting brethren at the Westminster Assembly make this clear in their *Apologeticall Narration*.[36] John Owen remarked: "The pattern of the first churches constituted by the apostles, which it is our duty to imitate and follow as our rule, constantly expresseth and declares that *many elders* were appointed by them in every church."[37] The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order (the confession of the English Puritan congregationalists) makes the same thing clear.[38]

The Particular Baptists also declared themselves in favor of a plurality of elders in the church. James Renihan, in a lengthy treatment of the subject of church officers, shows that there were various views of this matter, but he shows in some detail that

the Particular Baptists of the late seventeenth century held with rare exception to a plurality of elders.[39] It is not surprising to discover, therefore, that the 1689 Baptist Confession suggests that each church should have a plurality of elders:

> A particular church, gathered and completely organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members; and the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church (so called and gathered), for the peculiar administration of ordinances, and execution of power or duty, which he intrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are bishops or elders, and deacons.[40]

It is true that ways of organizing this eldership varied. Many of the Puritan congregationalists organized their eldership into teaching elders and ruling elders in a very Presbyterian fashion.[41] While admitting that some Particular Baptists organized their elderships in this way, Renihan concludes: "The majority of the Particular Baptists were committed to a plurality and parity of elders in their churches."[42]

Second, what was the relationship of the authority of these elders to the power of the church as a whole? This is not an easy issue, but on this matter two impulses guided Puritan congregationalism and the Particular Baptists in the seventeenth century "in a middle way betwixt . . . *Brownisme* and . . . the *authoritative Presbyteriall Government*."[43]

The first impulse that guided Puritan congregationalism in all its forms was to safeguard the rights of the church to consent to the appointment of officers and to the discipline of the membership. Both the 1689 Baptist Confession[44] and the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order adopted in 1658 by English congregationalists[45] expressly state that the election of officers requires the common suffrage of the church. The Savoy Declaration *also* requires the consent of the church for the addition of members to the church[46] and for acts of discipline.[47] The Cambridge Platform agreed upon by the messengers of New England congregationalists in 1648 requires that church officers be freely elected by the church and also teaches that churches have power to depose their officers in chapter 8, paragraphs 6 and 7. The same document in chapter 10, paragraph 5, also makes the admission and removal of officers the prerogative of the

church.[48] These different documents cover the three most important wings of Puritan congregationalism.[49]

The second impulse that guided the Puritan congregationalists was their emphasis on the importance of the rule of elders in the local church. One could easily conclude from the emphasis in the formal documents of early congregationalism that they were committed to a thoroughly democratic view of church government with little real need for the rule of elders. This conclusion, however, would be quite misguided. The Cambridge Platform asserts in chapter 4, paragraph 2 that, while elders are not necessary to the very being of a local church, they are necessary to its well-being.[50] Renihan concurs on behalf of the Particular Baptists.[51] The Cambridge Platform also asserts that the government of the church is a mixed government, being first a monarchy (because of Christ the king), then a democracy (because of the power of the church), and finally an aristocracy (because of the rule of the presbytery). The *Apologeticall Narration* cites approvingly the opinions of Cartwright and Baynes who "place the power of excommunication in the Eldership of each particular church with the consent of the Church."[52] Renihan's account of how the eldership functioned in Particular Baptist churches with regard to church discipline makes clear that the elders exercised a crucial role.[53]

The thoroughly democratic congregationalism that characterizes many evangelical churches today is the unbalanced offspring of the more balanced congregationalism of a better ecclesiastical day. Without denying the power of the brotherhood, it balanced this power by means of its emphasis on a plurality of elders. The church and the eldership each exercised a role in church government that was critically necessary, even to the point that the Cambridge Platform could say that "no church act can be consummated, or perfected without the consent of both."[54] Thus, by the will of Christ, the king of the church, the church and the elders were to have distinct and interlocking roles to fulfill in the government of the local church.

ITS DEMONSTRATION

Four principles are involved in plural-elder congregationalism and must be demonstrated from the Scriptures. They are the Puritan, the Independent, the Democratic, and the Plural-elder principles.

The Puritan Principle

The Puritan principle asserts that we are given a model for church government in the Scriptures to which we are neither to add nor subtract. Deuteronomy 12:32 is, thus, applicable to church government: "Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it."

Along with the Puritans, I believe, however, that a distinction exists between the parts or elements of this church government and its circumstances or implementation. The 1689 Baptist Confession, in language substantially identical to the Westminster Confession and Savoy Declaration, asserts this unambiguously:

> There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and *government of the church*, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. (italics mine)[55]

The thrust of this statement is that, though the written Word of God is sufficient to tell us how to worship God and govern the church, the circumstances and implementation of the biblical order are left to our sanctified common sense and the general principles of Scripture. Of course, they are! No book could be big enough to cover all such circumstances.

On the other hand, though the biblical model of church government obviously does not include its circumstances, the Puritan view is that God does regulate the government of his church with much more specificity than, for instance, civil government. No specific model of civil government is mandated in the Scriptures, but a clear form of church government is.[56] If the regulative principle means anything, it means that God places a special focus on the ordering of the church's worship and government.

To demonstrate the Puritan principle of church government completely would require that all the biblical arguments for the regulative principle of worship be marshaled. The limitations of the present discussion do not allow that.[57] Therefore, I will focus attention on two New Testament passages that address the issue of church government directly.

First Timothy 3:14–15 is the pivotal passage with regard to the theme of 1 Timothy. Here Paul tells Timothy why he has written:

> I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

The significance of these verses for our purposes resides in two obvious features of the passage. First, Paul stresses the unique and glorious identity of the church. It is "the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth." In this threefold description Paul makes clear that the church possesses a peculiar identity in the world. It, and it alone, is the "household [or house] of God." Its uniqueness resides in its peculiar association with the living God. It is the assembly or church of the living God. Thus, it has a unique and awesomely important vocation. It is "the pillar and support of the truth."

Second, Paul stresses that the church's unique identity has great, practical implications for Timothy's leadership of the church at Ephesus. "I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God." This makes clear that the church identified by means of the threefold description in verse 15 comes to visible, local, and organized expression in the church at Ephesus. When we remember that this verse is telling Timothy why Paul is writing, this point is confirmed. In the preceding chapter Paul has instructed Timothy about the conduct of the assemblies of the church in Ephesus, addressing the place of prayer and of women. In chapter three itself Paul has given careful instruction about the officers of the church in Ephesus, addressing the qualifications for overseers and deacons in some detail.

From all this it is clear that the unique identity of the church requires a special conduct by Timothy and other Christians. Just as it would be outrageous to enter another man's home and without his permission begin to rearrange his furniture or discipline his children, how much more to think that we have the right to rearrange the specially arranged government of God's holy, glorious, and unique house!

The fact that there is a special, scripturally appointed government for the church is—if anything—even more clear in 2 Timothy 3:15–17:

> and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

This is the classic biblical assertion of the sufficiency of the Scriptures. It declares not only that the Scriptures are God-breathed (the literal meaning of "inspired by God" in verse 16), but also that the Scriptures have a multi-faceted profitability. They are profitable "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness." Even having said all this, Paul does not feel that he has done justice to the sufficiency of the Scriptures. In verse 17 he adds that they make "the man of God . . . adequate, equipped for every good work." The word translated "adequate" by the NASB means according to one lexicon *qualified to perform some function* and according to another *fully qualified*. The word translated "equipped" is derived from the same root and thus conveys the same idea. The prefix attached to the root emphasizes the idea. It is variously defined to mean *fully qualified, completely adequate,* or *thoroughly prepared or furnished.*

If the description "man of God" refers to every Christian, the plain inference would certainly be that the Scriptures thoroughly equip Christians for the good work of organizing the church to the glory of God. To evade this implication would require one to defend the proposition that ordering the church is not scripturally a good work.

The fact is that the phrase "man of God" is probably *not* a reference to every Christian, but to Timothy and others like him in places of leadership among the people of God. First, this same description is used to refer to Timothy again in 1 Timothy 6:11. Second, the Old Testament uses the same term to refer to such men as Moses (Deut. 33:1; Ps. 90:1), David (2 Chron. 8:14), Elijah (2 Kings 1:9), and the prophets (1 Sam. 2:27). If the reference here is to the leader of God's people, the reference to the sufficiency

of the Scriptures for ordering the life and government of the church is even clearer.

Earlier I mentioned that the Anglican argument for implied apostolic sanction for episcopacy was questionable for reasons that go beyond the historical evidence. The more basic problem with this argument is that it directly implies that the Scriptures are not sufficient to order the life of the church. It bases its view on a supposed apostolic sanction which it admits is outside the Scriptures. Worse yet, it actually presumes to alter the church government of the Bible by introducing a distinction between bishops and elders. Not only is this distinction nowhere found in the Scriptures, it is actually contradicted (as we will see below) by the evidence of Scripture.

The Puritan principle has even more important applications today. Worse than the Anglican argument is the presumption of the church growth experts who argue that a single pastor is necessary for maximum church growth.[58] To argue that a single, strong pastor nowhere mandated in the Scriptures is necessary on such pragmatic grounds is directly to imply the inadequacy of the Scriptures for the man of God and to impugn the wisdom of the God who gave the Scriptures.

Finally, the Puritan principle reminds us that the idea of the church as a monarchy is not just a nice sounding theory. The church is very really the house of God over which Christ the priest-king of his people rules through his Word (Heb. 3:6; 10:21). "The crown-rights of King Jesus in his church" take on practical meaning when we understand this. It is in the context of this principle and as its practical outworking that we must understand the meaning of the Independent, Democratic, and Plural-elder principles.

The Independent Principle

At the outset of this defense of the Independent principle, it is necessary to define carefully what it is and what it is not. I begin with what it is not. The Independent principle is not, of course, independence from Christ's authority as priest-king over the church. Neither does it mean that there is no universal church government. The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ himself as the cornerstone.

Christ, the priest-king, and his apostles are universal church officers and constitute the true government of the universal church.

The Independent principle does not mean that each church is self-sufficient in its gifts and graces with no need of assistance from other local churches. In line with this reality, the Independent churches have historically manifested their sense of need for close communion with one another in many ways. The Particular Baptists frequently formed formal associations and manifested fellowship among local churches in a wide variety of ways.[59] The Puritan congregationalists of England were not hesitant to speak of meeting in occasional synods or councils.[60] The New England congregationalists probably carried these principles even further by means of their ministerial consociations, but certainly agreed with their English brethren.[61] The proceedings of these associations, consociations, synods, and councils were, of course, advisory in character. They exercised no authority or jurisdiction over the internal affairs of the local church.[62]

What, then, is the Independent principle? It may be identified negatively and positively. Negatively, it means that there is no ecclesiastical authority in the visible church on earth with jurisdiction over the local church. The local church is directly accountable to Christ and the apostles in heaven and, thus, independent of all earthly ecclesiastical authority. Positively, it means that each local church has been given sufficient authority to order its worship and discipline. In the words of chapter 26 and paragraph 7 of the 1689 Baptist Confession:

> To each of these churches thus gathered, according to his mind declared in his word, he hath given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe; with commands and rules for the due and right exerting, and executing of that power.[63]

Having clarified the meaning of the Independent principle, we are now in a position to examine its biblical basis. We will do so, first, by showing the biblical basis of the paragraph cited above from the 1689 Baptist Confession. This paragraph says five things about the authority given to the local church. Each of these five points is supported by the two major scriptural passages on

exercising church discipline (Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:1–13, especially verses 4 and 5). No greater exercise of church power is conceivable. If the local church is competent for church discipline, then it is competent to all lesser exercises of authority. In these passages the *defined recipient* of this power is the local church. Even the local church at Corinth with all its problems possesses this power. In neither passage are the elders of the church even mentioned. On the other hand, there is repeated reference to the church and its assemblies. Its *complete sufficiency* is suggested by the mention of the keys of the kingdom in Matthew 18:18–19. In 1 Corinthians 5 this sufficiency is suggested by the assertion that in their assembly the power of the Lord Jesus was present (v. 4) and by the command to remove the wicked man in vv. 7, 13. The *origin* of this power is clearly Christ himself (Matt. 18:20; 1 Cor. 5:3–5). Christ exercises this power immediately through the local church with no indication of any mediating authority. The *specified purpose* of this power includes even the excommunication of a member of the church (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:7, 13), but worship is also suggested by Matthew 18:20. Its *regulated execution* is clearly indicated by the detailed rules for its exercise given in Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Corinthians 5:4, 11; and 2 Corinthians 2:6–8.

Suggestive evidence for the independence of the local church comes from the letters to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2–3. Here the subject of church discipline is repeatedly emphasized by Christ, but each church is held solely responsible for its own members and their discipline. Christ never asserts, assumes, or implies that the other churches may exercise church discipline by intervening in another church's affairs. The entire group is not held responsible or told to act for the discipline of Laodicea. This is not to deny the responsibility one local church may have to call another to repentance for failure to exercise appropriate discipline. Remember Clement's letter to the church at Corinth. This, however, is plainly different than calling a council and executing the discipline needed through the authority of that council.[64]

More evidence for the independence of the local church may be derived from passages where elders and their authority and responsibilities are associated with particular local churches. For instance, in Acts 20:28 the elders of Ephesus (see v. 17) are told to "be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, *among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*" (italics mine). Similarly, the command to the church at Thessalonica is, "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor *among you*, and have charge *over you* in the Lord and give *you* instruction" (1 Thess. 5:12, italics mine).

Now such evidence will probably not be appreciated unless we consider the issue of the burden of proof in this matter. The Puritan principle (which presbyterians historically accept) is that there is a divinely mandated form of church government given in the Scriptures. Aside from mere circumstances, nothing is to be added to or subtracted from this form of church government. Now we have clear evidence that elders were to oversee their own flocks. We have clear evidence that local churches had authority to maintain the purity of their own assemblies. Where, however, is the warrant or precedent for elders ruling or exercising discipline in other churches? The burden of proof is on the presbyterian view, especially in light of the Puritan principle.

The key passage upon which presbyterians seek to base their view is Acts 15.[65] If this passage does not clearly support their view, they cannot make their case. Essentially, the presbyterian argument from Acts 15 rests on two points. First, the gathering in Jerusalem exercised authority over many different local churches. This point is certainly correct (Acts 15:23; 16:4). Second, the gathering in Jerusalem was a church council or synod constituted by elders representing many different local churches. It is this point which must be disputed.

It is true that "elders" were *subordinately* involved in the authoritative decision (Acts 15:23; 16:4), but so also was the whole church (15:22). Thus, if this passage supports the government of many churches by a council of elders, it also supports the government of many churches by whole congregations.[66] It is not true, however, nor can it be proven that this council was composed of the elders of many churches or even two churches. There is no evidence that even Paul and Barnabas were among "the apostles and elders" who made the decision (15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4). In fact, Acts 15:2, 4 and 16:4 specifically exclude Paul and Barnabas from the elders in view. Furthermore, absolutely no proof exists that any of the elders of the many other churches to whom the decrees were delivered were present.

For many reasons the church of Jerusalem had a unique authority in redemptive history unparalleled by any other church.

Hence, it cannot, and its elders cannot, be made an example for other later and lesser churches. (1) Chiefly, it was the church where the twelve apostles dwelt. Their influence and presence gave her official statements authority over all the churches. (2) It was the first and mother church of Christianity. (3) Its leaders (even without counting the Twelve) were the original disciples and followers of Christ. Elders such as James, the half-brother of our Lord, though not among the original twelve apostles, exercised an authority that can only be called apostolic (Gal. 2:9; 1 Cor. 15:7).

Bottom line, Acts 15 cannot sustain the burden of proof that presbyterians place upon it. It was not a gathering of the elders of many churches. It exercised authority over the churches, not for this reason, but because it had a unique place in redemptive history and because of its apostolic leadership. The independence of the local church is taught in the Scriptures. No other view has either precedent or warrant in the Scriptures.

The Democratic Principle

I use the adjective "democratic" with some hesitation. In our era, democracy as a form of government is opposed to both monarchy and aristocracy. I believe, as this chapter has already made clear, that in biblical church government democracy is qualified by the crown-rights of King Jesus in his church and also by the plural-elder principle. Thus, church democracy is not the same as popular sovereignty. Democracy in the present context is the right of the church to decide on the basis of the Bible what the will of the King is. It is not the right to vote as one pleases regardless of the will of the King.

Nevertheless, the Bible does recognize that the membership of the church has a foundational and critical role to play in the major decisions of church life. The matter in which this is most clear is corrective church discipline, including the actual putting of someone out of the church. The key texts on this subject (Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:1–13) have already been discussed in relation to the Independent principle.[67] The implication of the authority of the church to terminate membership is that it has the right to receive or admit new members.[68]

The right to excommunicate is so basic and important that we may infer from it that the church by its common suffrage has

the right to elect its own officers. The right to elect its own officers is confirmed by the manner in which the twelve apostles led the church to elect the seven (whom I think were clearly the first deacons). Acts 6:1–7 contains the account. Here, in spite of their presence in the midst of the church, the Twelve summon the "congregation of the disciples" (v. 2) and urge them to "select from among you seven men of good reputation" (v. 3). Consequently, "the whole congregation . . . chose Stephen" and the rest of the seven (v. 5).[69] The right of the church to elect officers implies the right of the church to remove officers that disqualify themselves.

I have used the word "election," however, with reservation. To modern ears an election connotes several things which clearly deviate from the Word of God. For instance, there is no scriptural instance in which two or more men compete with each other for votes in order that one of them should be elected to office. There is no basis for the idea that election is an act of sovereign and autonomous authority or that it is the ultimate source of power in the church. Again, this idea is completely contrary to the scriptural idea. We have no biblical right to vote for whomever we please. In Acts 6, 1 Timothy 3, and Titus 1 the apostolic qualifications for office in the local church are described. The church must submit to these qualifications in the exercise of their voting privileges. They may not refuse or remove a man who is qualified. They may not retain a man who is unqualified. The term "election" is used only to epitomize what the confessions mean when they say that calling to an office in the church must be "by the common suffrage of the church itself."

A final direction in which support for the Democratic principle may be sought is in the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6) and the ministry that the New Testament calls them to exercise to one another (Rom. 15:14; 1 Thess. 5:12, 14). The dignity of every believer is such a pervasive emphasis of the New Testament that we would be surprised if their consent was not required in the matters discussed above. Even, therefore, without the explicit passages cited above, we might have good ground to suppose that the consent of the church was necessary in matters of the church's membership and officers.

The practical implications of the Democratic principle are many. Systems of church government that do not regard the consent of the church as necessary for the expulsion of members and

the election of officers have deviated from the clear teaching of the New Testament. These systems may be an understandable reaction against the radical, democratic congregationalism typical of too many evangelical churches in our day. In the end, however, they will be found to be as susceptible to abuse as the system which they reacted against.

If the membership of the church is so critically involved in the government of the church, the importance of maintaining the purity of the church's membership cannot be underestimated. Biblical standards must be upheld for entrance into the church and continuance in the church.

Assuming this, pastors must resist the tendency to distrust the membership of the church. They must not seek to vest inordinate authority in themselves out of such mistrust. They must give credit for wisdom to a well-instructed and spiritual church.

The Plural-elder Principle

In the discussion of the distinctions within plural-elder congregationalism, I isolated two issues of primary importance: internal organization and the ecclesiastical authority of the eldership. These two issues will be the focus of this demonstration of the Plural-elder principle.

The Internal Organization of the Eldership

A comprehensive view of the internal organization of the eldership may be secured by a consideration of three matters: the plurality, the parity, and the diversity of elders.

The plurality of elders in local churches in the New Testament is not something that is doubtful.[70] We know of no church in the New Testament that had only a single elder.[71] On the other hand, we know of many churches with a plurality of elders: Jerusalem (Acts 11:30), Antioch in Syria (13:1), Lystra, Iconium, Pisidian Antioch (14:23), Ephesus (20:17), the churches of Crete (Titus 1:5), the churches of the Jewish dispersion to whom James wrote (James 5:14), probably the churches to whom Peter wrote in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bythinia (1 Peter 5:1–2), Philippi (Phil. 1:1), probably the churches to whom Hebrews was written (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24), and

finally the unidentified church whose presbytery laid hands on Timothy (1 Tim. 4:14).

Opposed to this massive evidence for a plurality of elders, the arguments for a single elder in each church appear weak indeed.[72] James, the brother of the Lord, is sometimes cited in this regard, but we know that there was a plurality of elders in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; 15:2; etc.). The angels of the seven churches (Rev. 1:20–3:14) are used in this way, but we know, for instance, that there was a plurality of elders in Ephesus (Acts 20:17). Some notice that in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7 "overseer" is singular, while in 1 Timothy 3:8 "deacons" is plural. However we are to account for this interesting fact, it cannot imply a single overseer or elder in each church. The immediate context of 1 Timothy 3:2 speaks of the *office of overseer* (v. 1), implying (what is clear from the rest of 1 Timothy) that there were a plurality of elders in the church at Ephesus (5:17). The immediate context of Titus 1:7 makes clear that elders were to be appointed in every city (v. 5).[73]

In light of the uniform and massive New Testament evidence for a plurality of elders in every local church, it is natural to ask how we should regard a church with only a single elder. Two responses to this question may be offered on the basis of the New Testament evidence. First, we may concede that a lack of a plurality of elders is not necessarily sinful. First Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 absolutely require certain qualifications for the office of elder; for example, he *must be* above reproach (vv. 2 and 7, respectively). The plain assumption of these passages is that not every Christian man possesses these qualifications. Hence, it might be possible in some local churches that no men or only one man might meet those qualifications at any given time. To appoint to office someone who lacks the apostolic qualifications would be sinful. Thus, the lack of a plurality may in some rare situations actually be a result of obedience to Christ.

On the other hand, we must not allow this concession to disguise the real abnormality of a lack of plurality.[74] A plurality of elders in each local church is a matter both of apostolic precedent (Acts 14:23) and precept (Titus 1:5). The lack of a plurality of elders in any church constitutes a real deficiency in its government (Titus 1:5). To suppose that it is no problem to be without such a plurality is to impugn the wisdom of the Christ who led the apostles to appoint such a plurality in the New Testament

churches.[75] Churches that lack a plurality of elders should not be complacent about the deficiency in their government. They should pray for a plurality of elders. They should use means to see a plurality raised up. If the lack is prolonged, they should seek the temporary assistance of the elders of a more fully organized church to defeat the dangers inherent in a church with only one elder.[76]

The parity of elders, as I am using it here, refers to their equality in office and authority. By advocating the parity of elders I am saying that every elder has the same authority or rule in the church. I am not saying that each elder has the same influence or power. Sheer influence and official authority are two different things in the Bible. Absalom wielded great power or influence in Israel when he rebelled against David, but David still possessed the official rule. Thus, as we shall see, parity of office may coexist with great diversity of influence.

The evidence for the parity of the elders is that the words for "elder," overseer," and "shepherd" all refer to the same office in the New Testament.[77] There is no distinction between elders and bishop in the manner of many in the early church. There is no distinction between elders and pastor in the manner of many in the modern church.

That elders and overseers are identical in the New Testament is evident in a number of passages. In Acts 20:17 Paul calls for the elders of the church. When they arrive, he refers to them as overseers (v. 28). In Titus 1:5 Paul commands that elders be appointed in every church and then proceeds to give qualifications for those elders whom he now calls overseers (v. 7). In 1 Peter 5:1–2 the elders are exhorted to exercise oversight.[78] The word used in verse 2 is the verb that means "to oversee" and comes from the same root as the word for "overseer." Even Anglicans, who would have a vested interest in finding a distinction between bishops (overseers) and elders in the New Testament, admit that it is absent there.[79]

More controversial today is the idea that shepherds (pastors) are identical with elders or overseers. The evidence is, however, compelling. First Peter 5:1–2 not only tells elders to be overseers (exercising oversight) but to shepherd (pastor) the flock of God. Acts 20:28 not only describes the elders of the church at Ephesus as overseers, it also commands them to "shepherd [or pastor] the

church of God." The arguments used against the equivalence of shepherd with elder and overseer by those who desire to make a distinction between elders and shepherds only serve to illustrate the desperateness of their cause. They argue that, though the verb "to shepherd" is used of the duty of elders and overseers in Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5, the noun is not used.[80] The force of this argument is that though elders and overseers are told to shepherd the flock of God, yet they are not shepherds. This is like saying that my job is writing books, but I am not a writer. This unlikely conclusion might lead one to expect that the noun is used many times of the pastoral office in the New Testament and in ways that support a distinction between shepherds and elders. Actually, the opposite is the case. The noun "shepherd" or "pastor" is used only once of the office of shepherd in the church. That text is Ephesians 4:11 where Paul refers to the pastor-teachers that Christ has given as gifts to his church. But it also offers no contrast or distinction between pastor-teachers and elders.

Perhaps those who use this passage to teach such a distinction do so because they assume that not all elders are teachers. Because they believe that not all elders are teachers, but are rather "ruling elders," they assume that there must be a distinction in Ephesians 4:11 between pastor-teachers and the rest of the (assumedly non-teaching) elders.

Six passages are important in assessing the distinction between teaching and ruling elders. James 3:1 warns, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment." No distinction is instituted in this passage between teachers and other elders. Acts 13:1 speaks of the leadership of the church in Antioch as consisting of "prophets and teachers." Each of the leaders of the church at Antioch, then, was one who proclaimed the Word of God as a matter of gift and office. The only difference is that some were prophets and others were teachers. There is no distinction here between teachers and other elders. Romans 12:7 deals with spiritual gifts and not directly with the subject of office in the church (see vv. 3, 6). In verses 7 and 8 the apostle distinguishes the gifts of teaching, leading, and exhorting. This distinction has seemed to some to justify the idea of a distinction between a ruling elder and a teaching elder. Office and gift—as everyone must recognize—are two different things. In light of 1 Timothy 3:1–7, it is

clear that every elder is required to be able to teach[81] and to rule[82] and, thus, in some measure must possess both gifts.[83] Titus 1:5–9 confirms the interpretation of 1 Timothy 3. In verses 9–11 Paul insists that the elder must hold sound doctrine and be able to use it both positively and polemically: "to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." Clearly, the elder-overseer-steward of Titus 1 must be a teacher.[84]

Sixth and last is 1 Timothy 5:17. It is the most important passage in the debate about teaching and ruling elders and the pastor/elder distinction. Clearly, it makes no distinction between the office of pastor and other elders.[85] Obvious features of the passage should waken us to the realization that this passage does not teach the common pastor/elder distinction. It is clear that more than one financially supported elder who labors in the Word and in doctrine is contemplated: "*those* who work hard at preaching and teaching." It is also clear that other elders who do not labor in the Word and in doctrine may be financially supported. Double honor (generous financial support) is for all who rule well. It is only *especially* for those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

Neither does 1 Timothy 5:17 make a distinction between two types or orders of elders: teaching elders and ruling elders. Its distinction is between elders who rule well and those who labor in the Word and doctrine.[86] This is not the teaching and ruling elder distinction. The passage never asserts that the only elders who teach are "those who work hard at preaching and teaching." Laboring in the Word and doctrine clearly refers to an *abundance* of labor in the work of teaching that surpasses that of even other well-ruling elders. The contrast is not between no teaching and teaching. It is between some teaching and a greater degree of teaching.[87]

The inevitable conclusion is that there is no warrant for a distinction between the office of pastor and the office of elder in the New Testament. Neither is the terminology which distinguishes teaching and ruling elders a good way of describing what the New Testament teaches with regard to the internal organization of the eldership. All elders are overseers and pastor-teachers. All elders must have the gifts of leadership and teaching.

The diversity of elders is clearly taught in the Scriptures. It is not a diversity with regard to office or authority, as we have seen, but a diversity of spiritual gift, financial support, and actual influence. In the first place, the Bible, church history, and

experience show that elders may have greatly varying gifts. The New Testament emphasizes the breadth of spiritual gifts and the sovereignty of God in imparting those gifts (Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12:4–31; Eph. 4:11; 1 Peter 4:10–11). There are several different gifts important specifically for the eldership.[88] God gives these spiritual gifts in varying degrees (Matt. 25:14–15).

The New Testament also teaches a diversity in the matter of financial support. Some elders may be supported by the church. Other elders may work at another vocation to support themselves. The key text here is, of course, 1 Timothy 5:17. Double honor in that text means generous financial support.[89] This financial support of the elders is, however, not to be indiscriminately divided among all elders. Timothy and the church at Ephesus under his leadership are to focus that financial support on the elders who rule well. Among those who rule well financial support is especially to be given to those who work hard at preaching and teaching. The measure of a man's spiritual gifts in ruling and especially teaching and preaching (as well as his experience, maturity, diligence, and godliness) is related to the matter of financial support.[90]

It is also clear that there may be great diversity in a man's actual influence. Paul labored more than all the apostles and so had a proportionately greater influence (1 Cor. 15:10). It seems clear that Peter exercised a greater influence than many of the other apostles (Matt. 16:18; Acts 1:15; 2:14, 38; 3:1).

The New Testament, then, teaches the plurality, parity, and diversity of elders in the local church. The distribution of responsibilities and ministries must be guided by each of these three principles. The diversity of gift, influence, and support must not disguise the parity of official authority belonging to each elder.[91] The parity and plurality of the elders should not suppress the implications of the diversity of elders in the distribution of the responsibilities and ministries in the church. Parity of office does not require an artificial equality in the distribution of ministry or financial support. Rather, Christ's sovereignty in giving a diversity of gifts should be acknowledged in such matters.[92]

The Ecclesiastical Authority of the Eldership

The Democratic principle discussed earlier might seem to require a purely democratic form of church government. We have seen that the Bible teaches that a church may exist without

elders (Acts 14:23). We have seen that the common suffrage of the church is crucial in matters of church discipline and the election of officers.

The pure democracy apparently implied by such biblical facts and practiced by many evangelical churches today represents, however, a very one-sided view of the relevant New Testament data. It seizes upon the democratic element in New Testament church government and forgets that there are in biblical church government elements of monarchy and aristocracy as well.

The radically democratic congregationalism of the contemporary church forgets that Christ is king of the church and rules it through the Word of God and, in particular, the teaching of his apostles. This means that the logical deductions we make about church government from our experience of democracy must give way to the decrees of the King about the government of the church. The Word of God has a tendency to put things together that we in our human wisdom tend to regard as contradictory. Thus, in spite of the apparently self-sufficient democracy suggested by the facts cited in connection with the Democratic principle, the Word of God appoints that the church should have a class of ruling officers.

The New Testament teaches that the church has officers with real authority and thus supplements the democracy of the church with what the Puritans called the aristocracy of the eldership. Two things in particular manifest the real authority exercised by the eldership: the authoritative descriptions of these officers and the divine origin of these officers.

There are seven descriptions of the ruling officers of the church. Each of these descriptive names for these officers manifests the real authority they possess.

1. He is an *elder* (*presbyteros*). This is the most common name for this officer and is used in many places. In Acts 11:30 and 1 Timothy 5:17 the authority of elders is clearly implied. This name suggests that he is a member of the ruling council of the church.
2. He is an *overseer* (*episkopos*). This is the next most common name for the office (cf. 1 Peter 2:25 where it is used of Christ and translated, "guardian"). This name suggests that the elder is a watchman, guardian, and public officer sent by a higher authority to watch over his affairs.

3. He is a *shepherd* (*poimen*). The elder is frequently pictured as a shepherd of a flock of sheep (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Peter 5:2).
4. The elder is several times described as a *leader* (from the verb, *hegeomai*, which sometimes means to lead or to govern; cf. Heb. 13:7, 17, 24). A related word is used of the governors sent by emperors to rule over the different provinces of their empires (1 Peter 2:14).
5. The elder is also sometimes described as a *teacher* (*didaskolos*). Elders are called pastor-teachers in Ephesians 4:11.
6. The elder is also described as a *steward* (*oikonomos*; cf. Titus 1:7). The steward is described as one whom the master puts in charge of other servants in order to provide for them in Luke 12:42 and is translated "city treasurer" in Romans 16:23.
7. The elder is also depicted as a *parent* in 1 Timothy 3:4–5.

Each of these descriptive names for the ruling office in the church designate it in one way or another as a position of authority. Several of them suggest that the authority of this ruling office is delegated from a higher authority—Christ. It is this significant implication which we must now consider.

The divine origin of true elders must also be emphasized. Acts 20:28 emphasizes this with the words "the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." Ephesians 4:11 emphasizes that pastor-teachers are gifts of Christ. Thus, the authority of true elders finds its origin in the activity of the risen Christ and the Spirit whom he has poured out on the church.

Today, elders are thought of as representatives of the church. Though they may act as its representatives, the evidence makes clear that they are not *mere* representatives. The descriptive names given to the office suggest that they have an authority far greater. Think of the names: overseer, leader or governor, and steward. And, as already noted, Acts 20:28 and Ephesians 4:11 suggest an authority not human but divine in origin. Without in any way contradicting the common suffrage of the church in electing elders, this puts their election in a new light. We now see that the church is by its common suffrage gratefully receiving a gift given it by its King! Provided that the person being considered is such a gift, the church is obliged to accept it.

The real authority of the elders over the church is very practical. The Puritan principle discussed above means, as we have seen, that a specific church government and form of worship are given the church by God. Neither the church nor its elders are permitted to alter these forms. Thus, the authority of the eldership is not a legislative power to add to the laws of God. The regulative principle of the church does not legislate the circumstances or application of church government or worship. With regard to such things, the elders have authority to arrange the circumstances of the church's life. In many cases the arrangements for such circumstances need not be brought to the church. It may, however, be wise to bring more major decisions before the church. In such cases the response of the church to its elders must be characterized by submission to its lawful rulers (1 Thess. 5:12; Heb. 13:17). Only if elders recommend something contrary to the Scriptures or that transgresses the boundaries of another human authority's jurisdiction should members of the church feel at liberty to oppose their recommendations. Of course, constructive suggestions and helpful comments should always be welcome.

The elders of the church oversee its finances. They are its stewards (Luke 12:42; Rom. 16:23) and overseers. Thus, the offering for the church in Jerusalem was brought to its elders (Acts 11:30). The deacons do not control the finances of the church. They administer them for the elders.

Even more important than these matters is the emphasis of the evidence presented on the responsibility and authority of the elders to lead the church by teaching it the Word of God.[93] This is implied especially by the descriptions of the elders as shepherds (who feed the flock), stewards (who give the other servants their rations at the proper time), and teachers (who, of course, teach). It is preeminently through this means that the eldership gives leadership to the sheep of Christ who will hear his voice!

Finally, it is clear that even in church discipline and the election of officers where the New Testament requires the voice of the church, the elders are to lead. Clearly, their authority requires them to present evidence and make recommendations in matters of church discipline. Clearly, their duty requires that they screen potential officers, recommend them to the church, and appoint them to office when elected (1 Tim. 5:22).[94]

The tenor of the New Testament's teaching regarding the ecclesiastical authority of elders is well stated by the Cambridge Platform:

> From the premisses, namely, that the ordinary powr of Government belonging only to the elders, powr of priviledg remaineth with the brotherhood, (as powr of judgment in matters of cenure, & powr of liberty, in matters of liberty:) It followth, that in an organizd Church, & right administration; all church acts, proceed after the manner of a mixt administration, so as no church act can be consummated, or perfected without the consent of both.[95]

The *consent of both* the church and its eldership (and, thus, the unity of the church) is required for every act where the church as a whole has a voice.

Chapter 4: Plural-Elder Congregationalism Notes

Samuel E. Waldron

[1]This distinction is not original with me. Bannerman in his classic presentation of presbyterian church polity distinguishes the congregational principle (by which he means the democratic) and the independent principle in independent church polity: James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (London: Banner of Truth, 1974), 1:v. Cf. also the comments on this distinction of James Renihan, *The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675–1705: The Doctrine of the Church in the Second London Baptist Confession as Implemented in the Subscribing Churches* (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997), 129.

[2]The 1689 Baptist Confession, perhaps historically the most influential confession of independent churches, illustrates this clearly (chapter 26, paragraphs 14 and 15).

[3]As I will argue below, a plurality of elders in the local church is not so obligatory according to the Scriptures as to necessarily involve sin if it does not exist. This is why I have qualified my statement with the words, *under normal circumstances*. Of course, though sin is not necessarily involved, the lack of plurality is a deficiency that for both biblical and practical reasons must be seriously addressed.

[4]The exception to this rule is that often elders are elected by the church. After this election, however, the elders' decisions are decisive in church discipline and other matters.

[5]Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 2:300–301. But see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 925; and Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 587–90. Grudem asserts that presbyterian churches elect their own elders. It is true that Berkhof not only allows that "both the officers and the ordinary members of the church have a part" in the calling of the ordinary officers of the church, but even speaks of "the relative autonomy of the local church." As an independent I welcome Berkhof's statements. His treatment in my opinion contains major concessions to congregationalism and compromises the real principles of the historic, presbyterian system.

[6]Shawn Wright, "Authority, the Congregation, and Elders: The Struggle for Biblical Rule among the Particular Baptists" (paper presented to Dr. Timothy George in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a university study course, Beeson Divinity School), 1997. In this paper Wright traces the decline of a plurality of elders to four factors, the most important of which he says was "the fear that having a plurality of elders would remove the authority from the congregation" (pp. 19–20, 30). Whether Wright is correct or not, it cannot be denied that there is a problem or tension here that needs to be addressed by those from a congregational background who wish to hold a plurality of elders. Cf. also Greg Wills's essay in *Polity*, ed. Mark Dever (Center for Church Reform, 2001), 34.

[7]Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Sidrach Simpson, Jeremiah Burroughes, William Bridge, *An Apologeticall Narration Humbly Submitted to the Honourable Houses of Parliament*, ed. Robert S. Paul (Boston: United Church Press, 1963), 9.

[8]The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order (1658) (London: Evangelical Press, 1971), 4.

[9]This is chapter 21:1 in the Westminster and 22:1 in the Savoy and 1689.

[10]Renihan, *The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists*, xvi-xvii. Here is what he says: "At the root of particular Baptist ecclesiology was keen primitivistic impulse. T. L. Underwood has identified this as 'the emphasis in faith and practice on the first, earliest pattern as described in the New Testament that entailed efforts to re-create or imitate such a form in the present.' Throughout this investigation, it will be evident that the Baptists sought relentlessly to apply this principle to their doctrine and practice. It was the impetus behind the development of believer's baptism, the practice of immersion, the order and government of the church, the roles of officers, the various aspects of worship and the outworking of inter-church relationships. . . .The pattern was found in the New Testament, and the responsibility to replicate it was paramount in the congregations of saints."

[11]Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 1:339. The twentieth of the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles states: "The Church hath power to decree rites or ceremonies and authority in the controversies of the Faith. And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything contrary to God's Word written."

[12]Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 1:339–40.

[13]My view is that elders should be installed into their office in a local church by means of the laying on of the hands of the existing eldership of the church and that in this sense they should be ordained.

[14]It is in my opinion biblically appropriate to express respect in the way we address others and especially those in authority over us. Since elders do have authority over us, it is proper on appropriate occasions (not always and on every occasion) to address elders as *Pastor John* or *Pastor Smith*.

[15]This is an important issue, but the vast majority (though not all) of plural-elder congregationalists agree that at least some elders should be regularly supported. Cf. especially 1 Cor. 9:14; Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17.

[16]A ninefold classification may be used to identify the writings usually classed as the Apostolic Fathers. Not all were actually written by the person named in the title. What follows is a list of those writings together with the standard dating and assessment of each. Clement of Rome's *Epistle to the Corinthians* is thought to be genuine (authored by the biblical Clement) and written about AD 97. Ignatius's *Seven Epistles (to the Ephesians, Magnesians, Trallians, Romans, Philadelphians, Smyrnans, and Polycarp)* are thought to be genuine in their shorter versions and were probably written in the year 107. Polycarp's *Epistle to the Philippians* is associated with *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* and is regarded as genuine and was written in the year 156. The *Didache*, also known as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, was not written by the twelve apostles, but was probably the work of an editor around the year 150 who was working with sources dating from the year 100 or earlier. *The Epistle to Diognetus* has an unknown author and may have been written about the year 129. *The Epistle of Barnabas* was not written by the biblical Barnabas but dates from about the year 131. *The Shepherd of Hermas* was not the production of the biblical Hermas, but

was written about the year 145 in Rome. *Pseudo-Second Clement* was not written by the biblical Clement and dates from about the year 140. The *Fragments of Papias* are quotations from the lost five-volume work of the early disciple Papias which is dated about the year 125. These quotations are found in Eusebius of Caesarea's church history (written about the year 324).

[17]J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 202.

[18]Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 2:2; *Early Christian Fathers*, trans. and ed. Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 88.

[19]*Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians*, chapters 54, 42, 44, 57; *Early Christian Fathers*, trans. and ed. Cyril C. Richardson, 68, 62, 63, 64, 69.

[20]*Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis 2, ch. 4. Cf. also Vis 3, Sim. 9, ch. 27. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1905), 2:12.

[21]Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, 193–201.

[22]F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 206.

[23]Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 203–4. Cf. also Thomas M. Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries* (Minneapolis: James Family Publishing, 1977), 204. Lindsay remarks: "During the last decades of the second and throughout the third century the conception of Ignatius, to him perhaps only a devout dream, dominated the whole Church, or at least a great part of it.... Compare Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire*, pp. 370–71, where he says that Ignatius is not an historian describing facts but a preacher giving advice; and adds that he does not find in Ignatius proof that bishops were regarded as ex-officio supreme, that his language is quite consistent with the view that the respect actually paid to the bishop in each community depended on his individual character, and that his reiteration of the principle of the authority of the bishop, which came to him as a revelation, makes it evident that he did not find his ideal in actual existence."

[24]*Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians*, chapter 54; *Early Christian Fathers*, trans. and ed. Cyril C. Richardson, 68. The key words are: "Well, then, who of your number is noble, large-hearted, and full of love? Let him say: 'If it is my fault that revolt, strife, and schism have arisen, I will leave, I will go away wherever you wish, and do what the congregation orders. Only let Christ's flock live in peace with their appointed presbyters.'"

[25]*Didache*, ch. 15; *Early Christian Fathers*, trans. and ed. Cyril C. Richardson, 178.

[26]With the development of single bishop rule in the local church, the churches eventually moved away from independency and in the direction of diocesan episcopacy (in which many churches were ruled by a single bishop).

[27]Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, 202.

[28]Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 90. Ahlstrom makes the "Puritan Century" to be the period from the accession of Elizabeth to the Restoration of Charles II.

[29]Renihan, *The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists*, 1–15.

[30]Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts (1630–1650)* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 53–101.

[31]Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts (1630–1650)*, 263–313.

[32]Goodwin et al., *Apologeticall Narration*, 8–14, 23–24.

[33]The authors of *Apologeticall Narration* also dislike the term, "Independencie" (cf. page 23), but this simply manifests its pejorative connotation in their day. Editor Robert S. Paul argues in his comments on this document that the term "congregational" was adopted at an early stage to describe their form of church government. Goodwin et al., 65–66.

[34]Wright, "Authority, the Congregation, and Elders: The Struggle for Biblical Rule among the Particular Baptists," 15–16.

[35]Wright, 15–16.

[36]Goodwin et al., *Apologeticall Narration*, 8–14.

[37]John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1968), 16:113.

[38]The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 44–45. Note particularly paragraphs 8–12 of "The Institution of Churches, and the Order Appointed in Them by Jesus Christ."

[39]Renihan, *The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists*, 177–230.

[40]This is chapter 26, paragraph 8 of the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689.

[41]The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 44–45. Note particularly paragraphs 9–12. With this compare the Cambridge Platform, chapters 6–7: Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism, 210–14.

[42]Renihan, *The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists*, 205.

[43]Goodwin et al., *Apologeticall Narration*, 24.

[44]In chapter 26, paragraph 9.

[45]In paragraphs 9, 11, and 12 of the Order appended to the Declaration of Faith.

[46]In paragraph 17 of the Savoy's Platform of Church of Order.

[47]In paragraph 19 of the Savoy's Platform of Church of Order. Cf. also Goodwin et al., *Apologeticall Narration*, 46–47.

[48]Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism, ed. Williston Walker (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1960), 194–237.

[49]Renihan, *The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists*, 128–76. Though the 1689 Baptist Confession provides a briefer account of the necessity of the consent of the church, there is no reason to think that there is any substantial difference in its views from that of the Cambridge Platform. In fact, Renihan has shown that the practice of those churches that subscribed the 1689 Baptist Confession was substantially the same in these respects.

[50]Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism, 210.

[51]Renihan, *The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists*, 182.

[52]Goodwin et al., *Apologeticall Narration*, 12–13.

[53]Renihan, *The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists*, 154–56, 209–11, 216.

[54]Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism, 220.

[55]This is chapter 1, paragraph 6 in each of the Confessions mentioned.

[56]I know that I am disagreeing with some theologians. I certainly am not denying that principles of civil righteousness are revealed in the Scriptures that impact our thinking about civil government. I am saying that the Scriptures nowhere require either a monarchy, an oligarchy, or a democracy. Nowhere is permission given to refuse subjection to the "wrong" form of civil government. Cf. Romans 13:1–7.

[57]Let me recommend my more lengthy treatments of that subject, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1999), 267–71; and *The Regulative Principle of the Church* (Quezon City, Philippines: Wisdom Publications, 1995). The latter is available from Truth for Eternity Ministries in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

[58]Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 929, 931. To his credit Grudem sees the unbiblical character of this argument.

[59]Renihan, *The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists*, 313–50. Note The 1689 Baptist Confession, chapter 26, paragraphs 14–15.

[60]Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 47–48. (Paragraphs 25–27 of the *Order*.)

[61]Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism, 229–34. (Chapters 15–16 of the Cambridge Platform.)

[62]Note the plain statements of this in the references given in the previous three footnotes.

[63]Compare the more detailed, but substantially identical statement in the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 43. (Paragraphs 4–6 of the Order.)

[64]Poh Boon Sing makes an interesting argument for the independence of the local church from the fact that there are seven lampstands (representing seven distinct churches) and not one lampstand with seven branches (as in the Old Testament tabernacle). *The Keys of the Kingdom* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Good News Enterprise, 1995), 59–61. John Cotton also argues for the independence of the local church from this passage. *John Cotton on the Churches of New England*, ed. Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 148–49.

[65]Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 2:325–26. Grudem (*Systematic Theology*, 926–27) confirms the importance of this passage to presbyterians.

[66]As Grudem points out (*Systematic Theology*, 926–27). It is likely that the elders and the whole church are mentioned to emphasize that not just the apostles but the entire church repudiated the teaching of those who had troubled the Gentile churches (Acts 15:24).

[67]Second Corinthians 2:6 should not, however, be forgotten in this regard. It confirms the democratic principle in 1 Corinthians 5 by speaking of the "punishment which was inflicted by the majority."

[68]This may be the implication of Acts 9:26. I do not see it to be necessary that an actual vote of the church be taken on this matter. In a larger church this may become unwieldy. The consent of the church may be obtained by a public announcement of the application for church membership to which no objection is made.

[69]Acts 14:23's reference to the stretching out of hands is often cited as an example of the popular election of elders. I doubt if that is the meaning of the text

at all. I think it refers to the laying on of hands by the apostles in ordination and not the lifting of hands by the church in election. Whether I am right or not, it certainly is not clear enough to be cited as a proof text in the present connection.

[70]My use of the biblical evidence here assumes what I have already argued in my treatment of the Independent principle. Thus, for instance, I assume that the church in Ephesus was really just one local church. Of course, if there were many congregations in Ephesus that were all part of one (proto-presbyterian) city church, it might be theorized that each of the individual congregations had only one elder. Grudem is, of course, correct to note that such a theory still suffers from a complete lack of evidence for it in the New Testament (*Systematic Theology*, 912).

[71]Of course, we do know of churches without any elders at all (Acts 14:23). Hence, I agree with the idea that elders are not necessary to the being, but only to the well-being, of the church. The reason, of course, that these churches lacked elders is that they had just been planted and were not fully organized. It is noteworthy that, when they were organized, a plurality of elders were appointed in each church by the apostles: "they ... appointed elders for them in every church."

[72]Here I express my debt to Grudem who identifies and refutes the major arguments for single elders in his *Systematic Theology*, 928–32.

[73]Some argue that the pattern of a plurality of elders was only due to the large size of the local churches in view. This argument fails because it admits that a pattern is biblical at least in some cases. More importantly, it fails because it lacks any biblical support. How do its advocates know that this was the reason for the pattern of plurality in the New Testament? Where is a single text to support the theory?

[74]Biblically speaking, it is necessary to speak of the abnormality of a lone elder. In the Bible elders are almost by definition plural. What I mean is that an elder is always part of a council or presbytery. We have seen the evidence for this in the local church. In the Bible we also read, however, of the elders of Israel (Ex. 3:16 and many other times), the elders of a city (Ruth 4:2 and many other times), the twenty-four elders in heaven (Rev. 4:10 and several other times in the book of Revelation), and the Sanhedrin is called the presbytery of the Jews (Luke 22:6; Acts 22:5).

[75]Of course, I am not denying that a merciful God may grant peace, good government, and blessing to a church that through ignorance or lack of gift does not possess a plurality of elders.

[76]The dangers are anarchy (the abuse of the elder) or tyranny (the abuse of the church).

[77]To avoid confusion, I must make clear that there are three Greek words used for this office (*presbyteros*, *episkopos*, and *poimen*). In the older English these words were translated respectively: presbyter, bishop, and pastor. The same words are often in more modern English translated: elder, overseer, and shepherd. Thus the designations, shepherd and pastor, overseer and bishop, and elder and presbyter, are simply the newer and older translations of the same three Greek words. All in my opinion refer to the same office in the church.

[78]The verb is *episkopeo*.

[79]Lightfoot, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 95.

[80]Poh Boon Sing, *The Keys of the Kingdom*, 166–67.

[81]First Timothy 3:2 contains the same root used in Romans 12:7.

[82]First Timothy 3:4–5 contains the same root used in Romans 12:8.

[83]First Timothy 3:1–7 requires that elders be "able to teach." The single Greek word translated "able to teach" is used elsewhere in the New Testament only in 2 Timothy 2:24. It is derived from the same root as the word for "teacher" in Ephesians 4:11 and is variously defined as "skillful in teaching" and "pertaining to being able to teach." The parallel use in 2 Timothy 2:24 seems to emphasize that "the servant of the Lord" must have the proper spirit of a teacher and be patient, gentle, and irenic when wronged and opposed. The description of "the servant of the Lord" as one who is able to teach is significant for our study. We suppose that it will be generally admitted that the servant of the Lord describes someone who, whatever in addition he may be, is certainly a pastor or minister of God's Word. The use of "able to teach" to describe such a one strengthens the conclusion that no distinction is to be made between the ordinary elder or overseer of 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and the pastor-teacher of 2 Timothy 2:24.

[84]Confirming this conclusion is the use of the term "steward." This term as it is elsewhere used in the New Testament clearly describes one who is charged to feed the people of God with instruction in the Word of God (Luke 12:42; 1 Cor. 4:1, 2; 1 Peter 4:10).

[85]This terminological distinction is absent from the passage. True, we may be used to calling the elder of the church who works hard at preaching and teaching *pastor* and calling the other overseers *elders*. We may all too easily read that understanding into this passage, but there is utterly no justification for that distinction in the passage itself.

[86]Actually, there is another distinction implied. It is a distinction between all the elders and the elders who rule well. Thus, we may distinguish in 1 Timothy 5:17 three concentric circles. The outer ring encompasses all the elders. The second ring encompasses all the elders who rule well. The innermost ring are the elders who rule well and who work hard at preaching and teaching.

[87]Other plain implications of this passage are important for a biblical view of the eldership. First Timothy 5:17 does not say that all elders must work hard at preaching and teaching. It allows for elders who may work for their living at something else. This disallows the interpretation that would make all elders full-time preachers. The passage does say that the priority of the church in terms of supporting elders must be on "those who work hard at preaching and teaching." This certainly teaches the primacy of the proclamation of the Word in the leadership of the church. Finally, the passage does assume that there are different degrees of the gifts of leading and teaching within the eldership and that these different degrees of gift may lead to differences of functions or roles within the eldership and to differences of financial support. See the treatment of the diversity of elders to follow.

[88]Romans 12:7–8 names the gifts of teaching, exhorting, and leading. First Corinthians 12:28 mentions the gifts of teaching and administration. First Peter 4:11 mentions the gift of speaking.

[89]Double honor in the context of 1 Timothy 5:17 is to be contrasted with the honor given to widows. Without any doubt this honor for widows consists in financial support (1 Tim. 5:3–4, 8, 16). Widows are, then, to be honored, while well-ruling elders are to be given double honor—the generous financial support necessary to comfortably support a man with a wife and children. The financial character of this honor is confirmed by verse 18. Here Paul cites the same Old Testament text that he used in 1 Corinthians 9:9 to teach that ministers of the gospel should live of the gospel or be generously, financially supported. He also cites a saying of the Lord that in both Matthew 10:10 and Luke 10:7 had to do with the financial support of those who preach the gospel.

[90]Of course, in some cases the church may be unable to do all it should with regard to the financial support of elders. In such cases the priorities set by 1 Timothy 5:17 should govern the distribution of financial support to elders.

[91]Within the ranks of those who like myself hold the plurality and parity of the elders, the "leading elder" view has developed. This view argues that it is reasonable and biblical to believe that one man will emerge to become the primary leader of the eldership. It is usually assumed that this man will be the main preacher and the chairman of the elders. In support of this, the examples of primary leaders such as Moses and Joshua in the Old Testament and Peter and James in the New Testament are cited. The example of the angels of the seven churches is also sometimes cited. The angel is assumed to be the primary leader or leading elder. I do not agree with some of the arguments brought forward to support this view. I am particularly troubled by the use of the seven angels of the seven churches to support the primary leader. For those who believe in the plurality and parity of elders, using this passage to support a primary leader view would prove far too much. If this use of the passage is proper, then it strongly tends to the view that there must be a primary leader in every church. It would also strongly imply that he should be terminologically distinguished from the other elders by being called the angel-elder. Such an interpretation of the passage would introduce an important element into the government of the church missing from the rest of the New Testament. It would do all this on the basis of a figurative reference in the book of Revelation. The violations of biblical hermeneutics in this should be obvious. It interprets plain passages on the basis of uncertain and figurative ones. Other interpetations much more consistent with the rest of the New Testament are available. The angels may be the human messengers that carried John's letters to each church. The Greek word for "angel" may also be translated "messenger." Alternatively, it may refer to the "guardian angel" of each church (cf. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 930–31). Yet, in light of what the New Testament teaches about the diversity of elders, I am prepared to accept a qualified version of this view. A leading elder may emerge as a kind of first among equals (*primus inter pares*) in the eldership. Within certain boundaries, this does not violate the plurality and parity of the elders. Some of those boundaries are as follows. The distinction between this elder and the other elders must always be a *de facto* and not a *de jure* distinction. It must be a distinction, in other words, of influence and not of office. This means that no terminological distinction may be reserved for this

elder. He must not be called the bishop, the pastor, the minister, or the senior pastor in contrast to the rest of the elders or the rest of the pastors. This would be to take a small but serious step away from the teaching of the Bible, as the history of the early church bears out. Likewise, it should not be taught that there must be a leading elder in every eldership. The emergence of a primary leader, while admitted to be permissible and occasional, must not be made mandatory or universal in the absence of biblical warrant. Practically speaking, the other elders must feel that they are the peer of the leading elder in office (if not in influence). Both the leading elder and the other elders must feel and act as if the leading elder is under the pastoral oversight of the other elders, just as all the other elders are.

[92]Of course, this does not mean that the best preacher should do all the preaching or receive all the financial support. The New Testament also teaches the value of multiple ministry in the church and the importance of developing gifts in the eldership and in the church. The principle of maximum edification (1 Cor. 14:1–26) does not mean that the one who is generally regarded as the best preacher or teacher should do all the preaching and teaching. A different voice may occasionally be of more edification than a greater gift.

[93]Once again this suggests the difficulty from a biblical perspective of *ruling elders* who do not teach.

[94]At least some of the Puritan congregationalists treated ordination as not essential to appointment to office in the church (Walker, Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism, 215–16). It seems to me, however, that a case could be made that ordination by the eldership is the last step in the biblical appointment of officers and that it is a qualification for the office that the eldership may withhold on biblical grounds (1 Tim. 5:22).

[95]Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism, 220.

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[96]Though I believe he diminishes the authority of elders somewhat and I think that his perspective on the role of a pastor as first among equals is inadequate.

[97]The reader will note that I said the "Bible," not just the New Testament, because the Old Testament is the origin of the office of elders (Num. 11), and such office was developed in the synagogue setting before its continuance in the New Testament phase of the church.

[98]The term "regulative principle of worship" is a term that arose after the Westminster Assembly (1643–48) had produced the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. The term itself is nowhere explicitly stated in the *Westminster Standards*, but the concept is certainly there.

[99]As Waldron has ably shown.

[100]They use the term "independent" to mean "self-governing." The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Protestant denomination in America. Its churches are autonomous but are associated together in a denomination to accomplish a common mission. Other churches are independent in that they are not associated with a denomination.

[101]The Westminster Confession of Faith, Ch. XXV, says,

1. The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.
2. The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.
3. Unto this catholic visible Church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto.
4. This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular Churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.
5. The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a Church on earth to worship God according to His will.
6. There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof.

[102]Universal, transcending all barriers, of race, gender, social standing, political persuasion, economic status, geography, etc.